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**THE KING OF THE GREAT CLOCK
TOWER, COMMENTARIES AND POEMS**



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TORONTO

THE KING OF THE GREAT CLOCK
TOWER, COMMENTARIES
AND POEMS

BY

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

NEW YORK

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1935

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PREFACE

A year ago I found that I had written no verse for two years; I had never been so long barren; I had nothing in my head, and there used to be more than I could write. Perhaps Coole Park where I had escaped from politics, from all that Dublin talked of, when it was shut, shut me out from my theme; or did the subconscious drama that was my imaginative life end with its owner? but it was more likely that I had grown too old for poetry. I decided to force myself to write, then take advice. In 'At Parnell's Funeral' I rhymed passages from a lecture I had given in America; a poem upon mount Meru came spontaneously, but philosophy is a dangerous theme; then I was barren again. I wrote the prose dialogue of *The King of The Great Clock Tower* that I might be forced to make lyrics for its imaginary people. When I had written all but the last lyric I went a considerable journey partly to get the advice of a poet not of my school who would, as he did some years ago, say what he thought. I asked him to dine,

tried to get his attention. 'I am in my sixty-ninth year' I said, 'probably I should stop writing verse, I want your opinion upon some verse I have written lately.' I had hoped he would ask me to read it but he would not speak of art, or of literature, or of anything related to them. I had however been talking to his latest disciple and knew that his opinions had not changed: Phidias had corrupted sculpture, we had nothing of true Greece but certain *Nike* dug up out of the foundations of the Parthenon, and that corruption ran through all our art; Shakespeare and Dante had corrupted literature, Shakespeare by his too abounding sentiment, Dante by his compromise with the Church.

He said apropos of nothing 'Arthur Balfour was a scoundrel', and from that on would talk of nothing but politics. All the other modern statesmen were more or less scoundrels except 'Mussolini and that hysterical imitator of his Hitler'. When I objected to his violence he declared that Dante considered all sins intellectual, even sins of the flesh, he himself refused to make the modern distinction between error and sin. He urged me to read the works of Captain Douglas who alone knew what caused our suffering. He took my manuscript and went away denouncing Dublin as 'a reactionary hole' because I had said that I was re-reading Shakespeare, would go on to Chaucer, and found all that I wanted of modern life in

'detection and the wild west.' Next day his judgement came and that in a single word 'Putrid'.

Then I took my verses to a friend of my own school, and this friend said 'go on just like that. Plays like *The Great Clock Tower* always seem unfinished but that is no matter. Begin plays without knowing how to end them for the sake of the lyrics. I once wrote a play and after I had filled it with lyrics abolished the play.' Then I brought my work to two painters and a poet until I was like Panurge consulting oracles as to whether he should get married and rejecting all that did not confirm his own desire.

God guard me from those thoughts men think
In the mind alone,
He that sings a lasting song
Thinks in a marrow bone;

From all that makes a wise old man
That can be praised of all;
O what am I that I should not seem
For the song's sake a fool.

I pray—for fashion's word is out
And prayer comes round again—
That I may seem though I die old
A foolish, passionate man.

W. B. Yeats.

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THE KING OF THE GREAT CLOCK TOWER:

First performed at The Abbey Theatre on the thirtieth of June, nineteen thirty-four.

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

THE KING	(Dressed in red)
THE QUEEN	(Dressed in orange with details in black or red)
STROLLER	(Dressed in black with details in red)
FIRST ATTENDANT	(Dressed in black. Bass Voice)
SECOND ATTENDANT	(Dressed in black. Tenor Voice)

THE KING OF THE GREAT CLOCK TOWER

[When the stage curtain rises it shows an inner curtain, pale purple in colour. It may have a stencilled pattern of dancers. At the right and left sides of the proscenium are a drum and gong.]

The Queen should wear a beautiful impassive mask, the Stranger, a wild half-savage mask. It should cover the upper part of his face, the lower part being hidden by his red beard.

The attendants stand by drum and gong; they slowly part the curtains, singing.

SECOND ATTENDANT. They dance all day that dance in Tir-nan-oge.

FIRST ATTENDANT. There every lover is a happy rogue;

And should he speak, it is the speech of birds.

No thought has he, and therefore has no words,

No thought because no clock, no clock because

If I consider deeply, lad and lass,

Nerve touching nerve upon that happy ground,
Are bobbins where all time is bound and wound.

SECOND ATTENDANT. O never may that dismal thread
run loose;

FIRST ATTENDANT. For there the hound that Oisín
saw pursues

The hornless deer that runs in such a fright;
And there the woman clasps an apple tight,
For all the clamour of a famished man;
They run in foam, and there in foam they ran
Nor can they stop to take a breath that still
Here in the foam, the beating of a bell.

*[When the curtains are parted one sees to left
the King and Queen upon two thrones, which
may be two cubes. There should be two
cubes upon the opposite side to balance them.
The background and the cubes are a rich
blue. The background may be a curtain hung
in a semi-circle, or a semi-circle of one foot
Craig screens, so painted that the blue is
darker below than above.*

*The two Attendants sit down by drum and
gong, they remain facing the audience at
either side of the stage, but a little in the
shadow.*

THE KING. A year ago this night, you walked into
my house. I made you my Queen, yet neither I, nor
any other man, know from what Country you came.

And now before our friends and courtiers here assembled, I ask you, not for the first time, where that Country is, who and what you were before you became my Queen? You have kept silence long enough, sat there an image of stone or wood. That silence has become unendurable to these others, and to me.

[There is a pause. The Queen neither speaks nor moves. First Attendant strikes the drum three times.]

THE KING. Captain of the Guard.

FIRST ATTENDANT *[speaking as Captain of the Guard without turning his head]*. King, I am here.

KING. Someone has struck three times upon the great door. Admit him!

FIRST ATTENDANT *[speaking as before]*. I will admit him.

[The Stroller enters.]

THE KING. What is your name?

STROLLER. It is enough that I am a stroller and a fool, and that you are the King of the Great Clock Tower.

THE KING. I am that King. What do you want?

STROLLER. A year ago somebody told me that you had married the most beautiful woman in the world, and from that moment I have had her image in my head, and month by month, it has grown more and more beautiful. I have made poems about her and sung them everywhere, but I have never seen her.

THE KING. Have you no wife or sweetheart of your own?

STROLLER. I had a wife, but she was so much uglier than the image in my head, that I left her. The other night I was eating my dinner in a tavern; I am a man of no account, and so must eat my meals amongst servants and boors; a man there said I was a fool, because I was in love with a woman I had never seen.

THE KING. But what have I to do with it?

STROLLER. I do not want to be called a fool. Send for the Queen that I may look at her.

THE KING. You seem to me a brazen, audacious man, not caring where you stand, nor of whom, nor to whom you speak.

STROLLER. I have never shown disrespect to the image in my head, yet I must see the woman herself.

THE KING. She is at my side.

STROLLER. Is this the Queen of the Great Clock Tower?

THE KING. She is that Queen.

[The Stroller stands in front of the Queen.]

STROLLER. She is not so tall as I had thought, not so white and red, but what does it matter, I shall proclaim everywhere that she is the most beautiful woman in the world.

THE KING. Then go! You have seen her.

STROLLER. Not yet. I was a little drunk that night when they mocked me, and I swore that not only

would I see the Queen, but that—O, I must have been very drunk—that she would dance for me.

THE KING. What!

STROLLER. When she has danced, I shall be grateful, and I shall sing.

THE KING. I shall have you flogged.

STROLLER. Then you will flog a sacred man.

THE KING. How? A sacred man?

STROLLER. I will tell you a great secret. I went to the Boyne where the old Gods live. I lay there for a month eating nothing. Then I saw Aengus and all the Gods. I told them of my oath and all the Gods shouted. After that there was silence and then Aengus spoke; and listen well for these were his very words:—

‘Upon the last night of the year, when the Great Clock strikes the last note of midnight, the Queen shall kiss you upon the mouth.’

THE KING. Captain of the Guard!

FIRST ATTENDANT [*speaking as Captain and as before*]. I am here!

THE KING. I give this man to you. He has said that the Queen will kiss him upon the mouth at the last stroke of the clock. Take him therefore and strike his head from his body.

FIRST ATTENDANT [*speaking as Captain of the Guard*]. I will strike his head from his body.

STROLLER. I go, but this is what will happen. First

[*counting on his fingers*] the Queen will dance; second, I shall sing—

THE KING. What with your head off?

STROLLER. When I am grateful, I sing. The Queen, being grateful, will give me a kiss.

[*He goes right.*]

THE KING. Stop! You have told us nothing but lies.

KING [*to Queen*]. Speak! Who is this man? Perhaps if you will answer my questions, I shall spare his life.

[*The Queen remains silent and immovable.*]

THE KING. So be it. Whether his tale be true or not, it is plain that he wishes to sacrifice his life, to lay it down at your feet. Take him Captain of the Guard.

FIRST ATTENDANT [*speaking as Captain of the Guard*]. I take him.

[*The King thrusts the Stroller out to right.*]

THE KING. Bring me his head that I may know that he is dead. [*He now stands looking off stage.*] If he was not your lover before you came into this country. If he is nothing to you if he is nothing but a stroller and fool, if he is nothing but a man who has insulted you, laugh or sing, I do not care which it is.

[*The Queen moves for the first time. Turning her head slowly and looking at the King.*]

THE KING. Why do you fix your eyes upon me?

SECOND ATTENDANT [*singing as Queen in a low voice*].

O what may come
Into my womb!

THE KING. Ah, that is better. But sing out loud that
all here may know that you rejoice in his death.

[*The Queen rises.*]

SECOND ATTENDANT [*singing as Queen*].

He longs to kill
My body, until
That sudden shudder
And limbs lie still.

O, what may come
Into my womb,
What caterpillar
My beauty consume!

THE KING. I do not know what those words mean,
but they sound scornful.

[*The King goes out right and returns with the
head of the Stroller, and lays it upon the
cubical throne to right, nearest audience.*]

THE KING. Now I shall know if those lips can sing.
[*He sits on the other cubical throne to right.*]
You have our attention. Sing Stroller and fool.

[*The Queen begins to dance.*]

THE KING. That is a good thought. Dance! Turn

him into mockery with a dance. O, a good thought.
[*He laughs. The Queen lays the head on the ground at the centre of the stage, stands motionless looking at the head.*] Dance! Dance! If you are nothing to him but an image, a body in his head, he is nothing to you but a head without a body. What is the good of a lover without a body? Dance! He thought you were not so fine as the image in his head, nor so tall, nor so red nor so white. Dance! Display your beauty!

[*The Queen dances. Then stands in the centre of the stage, facing audience, the head upon her shoulder.*]

THE KING. The lips are opening. The eyes are moving.

FIRST ATTENDANT [*singing as head in a low voice*].
Images ride, I heard a man say—

THE KING. O, terror, it has begun to sing!

[*He cowers down covering his face.*]

FIRST ATTENDANT [*singing as head*].

Images ride, I heard a man say,
Out of Benbulbin and Knocknareagh,
What says the Clock in the Great Clock Tower?
Out of the grave. Saddle and ride
But turn from Rosses' crawling tide,
The meet's upon the mountain side.
A slow low note and an iron bell.

What made them mount and what made them come,
Cuchulain that fought night long with the foam;

What says the Clock in the Great Clock Tower.
Niam that rode on it; lad and lass
That sat so still and played at the chess?
What but heroic wantonness
A slow low note and an iron bell.

Aleel, his Countess; Hanrahan
That seemed but a wild wenching man;
What says the Clock in the Great Clock Tower?
And all alone comes riding there
The King that could make his people stare,
Because he had feathers instead of hair.
A slow low note and an iron bell.

[When the song has finished, the dance begins again, the Clock strikes. The strokes are represented by blows on a gong struck by second Attendant. The Queen dances to the sound, and at the last stroke presses her lips to the lips of the head. The King has risen and drawn his sword. The Queen lays the head upon her breast, and fixes her eyes upon him. He appears about to strike, but kneels, laying the sword at her feet. The two Attendants rise singing, and slowly close the inner curtain:]

FIRST ATTENDANT. O, but I saw a solemn sight;
Said the rambling, shambling travelling-man;

Castle Dargan's ruin all lit,
Lovely ladies dancing in it.

SECOND ATTENDANT. What though they danced;
those days are gone;
Said the wicked, crooked, hawthorn tree;
Lovely lady or gallant man
Are blown cold dust or a bit of bone.

FIRST ATTENDANT. O, what is life but a mouthful of
air;
Said the rambling, shambling travelling-man;
Yet all the lovely things that were
Live, for I saw them dancing there.

*[The Queen has come down stage and now
stands framed in the half closed curtains.]*

SECOND ATTENDANT. Nobody knows what may be-
fall;
Said the wicked, crooked, hawthorn tree.
I have stood so long by a gap in the wall
May be I shall not die at all.

*[The inner curtain is closed; the two Attendants
stand upon either side singing.]*

SECOND ATTENDANT. Why must those holy, haughty
feet descend
From emblematic niches and what hand
Ran that delicate rattle through their white?
My heart is broken, yet must understand.
What do they seek for? why must they descend?

FIRST ATTENDANT. For desecration and the lover's night.

SECOND ATTENDANT. I cannot face that emblem of the moon,

Nor eyelids that the unmixed heavens dart,

Nor stand upon my feet, so great a fright

Descends upon my savage, sunlit heart.

What can she lack whose emblem is the moon?

FIRST ATTENDANT. But desecration and the lover's night.

SECOND ATTENDANT. Delight my heart with sound; speak yet again;

But look and look with understanding eyes

Upon the pitchers that they carry; tight

Therein all time's completed treasure is:

What do they lack? O cry it out again.

FIRST ATTENDANT. Their desecration and the lover's night.

[I prefer the stanza in this form, but the musician may substitute the following as he may prefer something resembling a stop at the end of every line, nothing resembling a stop before the last word of any line, believing in spite of evidence that the words of the singer will be heard, even enjoyed, as words, if rhythm and punctuation be obvious. It might however be better to omit in performance this last song. I thought on the

*first night, though we left out one stanza
that there was too much music between the
end of the dance and the descent of the
curtain.*

FIRST ATTENDANT. Delight my heart with sound,
speak it again;
I look on feet but not upon a face;
Cry it again but understand the sight,
All time's completed treasure in one place;
What do they lack O cry it all again.

SECOND ATTENDANT. Their desecration and the
lover's night.

[The stage curtain descends.]

COMMENTARIES AND POEMS

COMMENTARY ON 'THE GREAT CLOCK TOWER'

I

When I was a young man I said to singers, 'If you want to sing unintelligible sounds sing a receipt from a cookery book, anything you want to get by heart'; but singing has changed—I can hear the words—I put my fingers in my ears to keep them out. The singer, shrill from conflict with the violins, loud from the strain of great concert halls, trained by some voice-producer to turn language into honey and oil, cannot sing poetry; that art died centuries ago, hardly perhaps survived, the unknown thirteenth century Italian poet who wrote upon 'true and false singing'.

A little wild bird sometimes at my ear
Sings his own verses very clear;
Others sing louder that I do not hear
For singing loudly is not singing well,
But ever by the song that's soft and low
The mastersinger's voice is plain to tell
Few have it and yet all are masters now.

And each of them can thrill out what he calls
His ballads, canzonettes and madrigals.

(My wife says 'Had you heard Elena Gerhardt or Campbell McInnes or Gervase Elwes you would know that's all nonsense'. 'But I have heard so and so' I say 'and so and so and their words although audible were more bloodless than veal'. 'O', my wife says, 'if you think they can sing'.)

II

I am not musical; I have the poet's exact time sense, only the vaguest sense of pitch; yet I get the greatest pleasure from certain combinations of singing, acting, speaking, drum, gong, flute, string, provided that some or all the words keep their natural passionate rhythm. Thirty years ago I persuaded Florence Farr, beautiful woman, incomparable elocutionist, to re-discover with the help of Arnold Dolmetsch, what seemed the ancient art of singing or speaking poetry to notes: Greek music if Greek music was, as some authorities think, 'regulated declamation.' Many people came to learn but she had only one successful pupil—I think her name was Taylor, I have not heard of her for many years—all others had the sense of pitch without the understanding of words or the understanding of words without the sense of pitch. I gave a number of lectures; Miss Farr spoke or sang

to her psaltery passages from Homer, Shelley, Keats or from my own writings. When one spoke to members of the audience they seemed divided like her pupils into musicians who said that she was out of tune and into well satisfied readers of poetry. I remember a famous war-correspondent saying, in an aggressive voice as he left the hall, 'singing is a decadent art.' It seemed that in the twelfth century everybody had but one set of ears and that it is now possible to have two sets that cannot be pleased at the same time. I was puzzled, sometimes doubtful, but encouraged now and again when some acknowledged authority—I remember a long notice by the musical critic of the *Manchester Guardian*—said that we had discovered a great lost beauty. I, at any rate, keep among my most vivid memories a moment when, during the performance of a Greek play translated by Gilbert Murray, Florence Farr and her one pupil sang or spoke about 'the daughters of the sunset' with alternating voices; so I thought, so I still think, did the ancient world where the poets 'I sing' seemed but literal truth, hear poetry.

When I had enough knowledge to discover some dramatic form to give her the opportunity she lacked Florence Farr had accepted a post in a Cingalese girls' school that she might hide her ageing beauty. I have the psaltery Arnold Dolmetsch designed for her, certain strings are broken, probably nobody will play on it again, but that I may not injure it by exposure

to the air I do not hang it upon the wall to revive old memories.

I did find one or two others. Sarah Allgood, could do, though in a different way, exactly what I wanted. I doubt if she could do so now for she sings in opera. The dirge in my *Deirdre*—‘Eagles have gone into their cloudy bed’—sung by her and somebody else, perhaps her sister, preserved the utmost poignancy of speech. Her method was ‘folk-singing’ or allied to it, beautifully humble and simple, whereas Florence Farr’s was Greek and arrogant.

III

I gave up the fight, began writing little dance plays, founded upon a Japanese model, that need no scenery, no properties, and can be performed in studio or drawingroom, thinking that some group of students might make a little money playing them and gradually elaborate a technique that would respect literature and music alike. Whenever I produced one of these plays I asked my singers for no new method, did not even talk to them upon the subject. When The Abbey School of Ballet was founded I tried these plays upon the stage where they seemed out of place. Why should musician or actor fold and unfold a cloth when the proscenium curtain was there, why carry on to the stage drum, gong and flute when the orchestra was there. *Fighting the Waves* and the pres-

ent play so far imitate the Japanese model that they climax in a dance, substitute suggestion for representation, but like the Japanese plays themselves they are stage plays.

The orchestra brings more elaborate music and I have gone over to the enemy. I say to the musician 'Lose my words in patterns of sound as the name of God is lost in Arabian arabesques. They are a secret between the singers, myself, yourself. The plain fable, the plain prose of the dialogue, Ninette de Valois' dance are there for the audience. They can find my words in the book if they are curious, but we will not thrust our secret upon them. I can be as subtle or metaphysical as I like without endangering the clarity necessary for dramatic effect. The Elizabethan singer, according to Edmund Spenser, and his music was simpler than yours, read out his song before he sang it. We will adopt no such arbitrary practice; our secret is our religion'.

IV

The dance with the severed head, suggests the central idea of Wilde's *Salome*. Wilde took it from Heine who has somewhere described Salome in hell throwing into the air the head of John the Baptist. Heine may have found it in some Jewish religious legend for it is part of the old ritual of the year: the mother goddess and the slain god. In the first edition of *The*

Secret Rose there is a story based on some old Gaelic legend. A certain man swears to sing the praise of a certain woman, his head is cut off and the head sings. A poem of mine called, 'He Gives His Beloved Certain Rhymes' was the song of the head. In attempting to put that story into a dance play I found that I had gone close to Salome's dance in Wilde's play. But in his play the dance is before the head is cut off.

He had famished in a wilderness,
Braved lions for my sake,
And all men lie that say that I
Bade that swordsman take
His head from off his body
And set it on a stake.

He swore to sing my beauty
Though death itself forbade,
They lie that say in mockery
Of all that lovers said,
Or in mere woman's cruelty
I bade them fetch his head.

O what innkeeper's daughter
Shared the Byzantine crown!
Girls that have governed cities,
Or burned great cities down,
Have bedded with their fancy-man
Whether a king or clown;

Gave their bodies, emptied purses
For praise of clown or king,
Gave all the love that women know!
O they had their fling
But never stood before a stake
And heard the dead lips sing.

A PARNELLITE AT PARNELL'S FUNERAL

Under the Great Comedian's tomb the crowd;
A bundle of tempestuous cloud is blown
About the sky, where that is clear of cloud
Brightness remains; a brighter star shoots down;
What shudders run through all that animal blood?
What is this sacrifice? Can someone there
Recall the Cretan barb that pierced a star?

Rich foliage that the starlight glittered through,
A frenzied crowd, and where the branches sprang
A beautiful seated boy; a sacred bow;
A woman, and an arrow on a string;
A pierced boy, image of a star laid low.
That woman, the Great Mother imaging,
Cut out his heart. Some master of design
Stamped boy and tree upon Sicilian coin.

An age is the reversal of an age:
When strangers murdered Emmet, Fitzgerald, Tone;

We lived like men that watch a painted stage.
What matter for the scene, the scene once gone:
It had not touched our lives. But popular rage
Hysterica passio dragged this quarry down.
None shared our guilt; nor did we play a part
Upon a painted stage when we devoured his heart.

Come, fix upon me that accusing eye,
I thirst for accusation. All that was sung,
All that was said in Ireland is a lie
Bred out of the contagion of the throng
Saving the rhyme rats hear before they die.
Leave nothing but the nothings that belong
To this bare soul, let all men judge that can
Whether it be an animal or a man.

COMMENTARY ON A PARNELLITE AT PARNELL'S FUNERAL

I

When lecturing in America I spoke of Four Bells, four deep tragic notes, equally divided in time, so symbolising the war that ended in the Flight of the Earls; the Battle of the Boyne; the coming of French influence among our peasants; the beginning of our own age; events that closed the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. My historical knowledge, such as it is, begins with the Second Bell.

When Huguenot artists designed the tapestries for the Irish House of Lords, depicting the Battle of the Boyne and the siege of Derry, they celebrated the defeat of their old enemy Louis XIV, and the establishment of a Protestant Ascendency which was to impose upon Catholic Ireland, an oppression copied in all details from that imposed upon the French Protestants. Did my own great-great-grandmother, the Huguenot Marie Voisin feel a vindictive triumph, or did she remember that her friend Archbishop King had been a loyal servant of James II and had, unless greatly slandered, accepted his present master after much vacillation, and that despite episcopal vehemence, his clergy were suspected of a desire to restore a Catholic family to the English throne. The Irish House of Lords, however, when it ordered the Huguenot tapestries, probably accepted the weaver's argument that the Battle of the Boyne was to Ireland what the defeat of the Armada had been to England. Armed with this new power, they were to modernise the social structure, with great cruelty but effectively, and to establish our political nationality by quarrelling with England over the wool trade, a protestant monopoly. At the base of the social structure, but hardly within it, the peasantry dreamed on in their medieval sleep; the Gaelic poets sang of the banished Catholic aristocracy; 'My fathers served their fathers before

Christ was crucified' sang one of the most famous. Ireland had found new masters, and was to discover for the first time in its history that it possessed a cold, logical intellect. That intellect announced its independence when Berkeley, then an undergraduate of Trinity College, wrote in his *Commonplace Book*, after a description of the philosophy of Hobbes, Newton and Locke, the fashionable English philosophy of his day, 'We Irish do not think so.' An emotion of pride and confidence at that time ran through what there was of an intellectual minority. The friends who gave Berkeley his first audience, were to found 'The Dublin' now 'The Royal Dublin Society,' perhaps to establish that scientific agriculture described and praised by Arthur Young. The historical dialectic trampled upon their minds in that brutal Ireland, product of two generations of civil war, described by Swift in a well-known sermon; they were the trodden grapes and became wine. When Berkeley landed in America, he found himself in a nation running the same course, though Ireland was too close to England to keep its independence through the Napoleonic Wars. America, however, as his letters show, had neither the wealth nor the education of contemporary Ireland; no such violence of contraries, as of black upon white, had stung it into life.

III

The influence of the French Revolution woke the peasantry from the medieval sleep, gave them ideas of social justice and equality, but prepared for a century disastrous to the national intellect. Instead of the Protestant Ascendency with its sense of responsibility, we had the Garrison, a political party of Protestant and Catholic landowners, merchants and officials. They loved the soil of Ireland; the returned Colonial Governor crossed the Channel to see the May flowers in his park; the merchant loved with an ardour, I have not met elsewhere, some sea-board town where he had made his money, or spent his youth, but they could give to a people they thought unfit for self-government, nothing but a condescending affection. They preferred frieze-coated humourists, dare-devils upon horseback, to ordinary men and women; created in Ireland and elsewhere an audience that welcomed the vivid imaginations of Lever, Lover, Somerville and Ross. These writers, especially the first, have historical importance, so completely have they expressed a social phase. Instead of the old half medieval peasantry came an agrarian political party, that degraded literature with rhetoric and insincerity. Its novels, poems, essays, histories showed Irish virtue struggling against English and landlord crime; historical characters that we must admire or abhor according to the side they took in politics. Certain songs

by Davis, Carlton's *Valentine McClutchy*, Kickham's *Knocknagow*, Mitchel's *History of Ireland*, numberless forgotten books in prose and verse founded or fostered a distortion we have not yet escaped. In the eighties of the last century came a third school: three men too conscious of intellectual power to belong to party, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, George Moore, the most complete individualists in the history of literature, abstract, isolated minds, without a memory or a landscape. It is this very isolation, this defect, as it seems to me, which has given Bernard Shaw an equal welcome in all countries, the greatest fame in his own lifetime any writer has known. Without it, his wit would have waited for acceptance upon studious exposition and commendation.

IV

I heard the first note of the Fourth Bell forty years ago on a stormy October morning. I had gone to Kingstown Pier to meet the Mail Boat that arrived about 6 A.M. I was expecting a friend, but met what I thought much less of at the time, the body of Parnell. I did not go to the funeral, because, being in my sensitive and timid youth, I hated crowds, and what crowds implied, but my friend went. She told me that evening of the star that fell in broad daylight as Parnell's body was lowered into the grave—was it a

collective hallucination or an actual event? Years after Standish O'Grady was to write:—

‘I state a fact—it was witnessed by thousands. While his followers were committing Charles Parnell's remains to the earth, the sky was bright with strange lights and flames. Only a coincidence possibly, and yet persons not superstitious have maintained that there is some mysterious sympathy between the human soul and the elements, and that storm, and other elemental disturbances have too often succeeded or accompanied great battles to be regarded as only fortuitous. . . . Those flames recall to my memory what is told of similar phenomena, said to have been witnessed when tidings of the death of Saint Columba overran the north-west of Europe.’

I think of the symbolism of the star shot with an arrow, described in the appendix to my book *Autobiographies*. I ask if the fall of a star may not upon occasion, symbolise an accepted sacrifice.

Dublin had once been a well-mannered, smooth-spoken city. I knew an old woman who had met Davis constantly and never knew that he was in politics until she read his obituary in the newspaper. Then came agrarian passion; Unionists and Nationalists ceased to meet, but each lived behind his party wall an amiable life. This new dispute broke through all walls; there are old men and women I avoid because they have kept that day's bitter tongue. Upon

the other hand, we began to value truth. According to my memory and the memory of others, free discussion appeared among us for the first time, bringing the passion for reality, the satiric genius that informs *Ulysses*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, *The Informer*, *The Puritan* and other books, and plays; the accumulated hatred of years was suddenly transferred from England to Ireland. James Joyce has no doubt described something remembered from his youth in that dinner table scene in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when after a violent quarrel about Parnell and the priests, the host sobs, his head upon the table, 'My dead King'.

We had passed through an initiation like that of the Tibetan ascetic, who staggers half dead from a trance, where he has seen himself eaten alive and has not yet learnt that the eater was himself.

v

As we discussed and argued, the national character changed, O'Connell, the great comedian, left the scene and the tragedian Parnell took his place. When we talked of his pride; of his apparent impassivity when his hands were full of blood because he had torn them with his nails, the proceeding epoch with its democratic bonhomie, seemed to grin through a horse collar. He was the symbol that made apparent, or made possible (are there not historical limbos where

nothing is possible?) that epoch's contrary: contrary, not negation, not refutation; the spring vegetables may be over, they have not been refuted. I am Blake's disciple, not Hegel's: 'contraries are positive. A negation is not a contrary.'

The rest I pass, one sentence I unsay.
Had de Valera eaten Parnell's heart
No loose-lipped demagogue had won the day,
No civil rancour torn the land apart.
Had Cosgrave eaten Parnell's heart, the land's
Imagination had been satisfied,
Or lacking that, government in such hands
O'Higgins its sole statesman had not died.
Had even O'Duffy—but I name no more—
Their school a crowd, his master's solitude;
Through Jonathan Swift's dark grove he passed, and
there
Plucked bitter wisdom that enriched his blood.

THREE SONGS TO THE SAME TUNE

I

Grandfather sang it under the gallows
'Hear gentlemen, ladies and all mankind
Money is good and a girl might be better
But good strong blows are delights to the mind'.
There, standing on the cart,
He sang it from his heart.

Those fanatics all that we do would undo;
Down the fanatic, down the clown;
Down, down, hammer them down,
Down to the tune of O'Donnell Abu.

'A girl I had, but she followed another,
Money I had and it went in the night,
Strong drink I had, and it brought me to sorrow,
But a good strong cause and blows are delight'.
All there caught up the tune:
'On, on my darling man.'

Those fanatics all that we do would undo;
Down the fanatic, down the clown;
Down, down, hammer them down,
Down to the tune of O'Donnell Abu.

'Money is good and a girl might be better
No matter what happens and who takes the fall,
But a good strong cause'—the rope gave a jerk there
No more sang he for his throat was too small;
But he kicked before he died,
He did it out of pride.

Those fanatics all that we do would undo;
Down the fanatic, down the clown;
Down, down, hammer them down,
Down to the tune of O'Donnell Abu.

II

Justify all those renowned generations;
They left their bodies to fatten the wolves,
They left their homesteads to fatten the foxes,
Fled to far countries, or sheltered themselves
In cavern, crevice, hole,
Defending Ireland's soul.

'Drown all the dogs' said the fierce young woman.
'They killed my goose and a cat.
Drown, drown in the water butt,
Drown all the dogs' said the fierce young woman.

Justify all those renowned generations,
Justify all that have sunk in their blood,
Justify all that have died on the scaffold,
Justify all that have fled, that have stood,
Stood or have marched the night long
Singing, singing a song.

'Drown all the dogs' said the fierce young woman.
'They killed my goose and a cat.
Drown, drown in the water butt,
Drown all the dogs' said the fierce young woman.

Fail, and that history turns into rubbish,
All that great past to a trouble of fools;
Those that come after shall mock at O'Donnell

Mock at the memory of both O'Neills,
Mock Emmet, mock Parnell:
All the renown that fell.

'Drown all the dogs' said the fierce young woman.
'They killed my goose and a cat.
Drown, drown in the water butt,
Drown all the dogs' said the fierce young woman.

III

The soldier takes pride in saluting his Captain,
The devotee proffers a knee to his Lord,
Some back a mare thrown from a thorough-bred,
Troy looked on Helen, it died and adored;
Great nations, blossom above;
A slave bows down to a slave.

'Who'd care to dig 'em' said the old, old man.
'Those six feet marked in chalk;
Much I talk, more I walk,
Time I were buried' said the old, old man.

When nations are empty up there at the top,
When order has weakened or faction is strong,
Time for us all to pick out a good tune,
Take to the roads and go marching along.
March, march—How does it run—
O any old words to a tune.

'Who'd care to dig 'em' said the old, old man.
'Those six feet marked in chalk;
Much I talk, more I walk,
Time I were buried' said the old, old man.

Soldiers take pride in saluting their Captain,
Where are the captains that govern mankind?
What happens to a tree that has nothing within it?
O marching wind, O a blast of the wind,
Marching, marching along.
March, march lift up the song:

'Who'd care to dig 'em' said the old, old man,
'Those six feet marked in chalk;
Much I talk, more I walk,
Time I were buried' said the old, old man.

COMMENTARY ON THE THREE SONGS

For thirty years I have been a director of the Abbey Theatre. It is a famous theatre, known to students of dramatic literature all over the world, but company and building are small, it often turns many away from its cheaper seats. It holds some five hundred persons; that five hundred, or whatever moiety of it is there on any particular evening, is mainly boys and girls out of the shops and factories. They come again and again to a favourite play, all others are casual or un-

certain, except some old adherents who have lasted out the thirty years, and a few students from the National University. If it were in Poland, in Sweden, in some Balkan State, it would have four or five times as many in company, in audience, draw into that audience those that were highly educated or highly placed, have behind it for moments of emergency ample Government support. It would be expected to send its best players now and again to foreign countries that it might raise the prestige of its nation as do the bronze replicas of the Roman wolf, a masterpiece of Etruscan art, the Italian Government has set up in America wherever Italian emigrants are numerous. When I was a foolish lad I hoped for something of the kind. When I founded the Irish Literary Society, the National Literary Society, barred from the Chair politicians and Lord Mayors that literature might live its own sincere life, I hoped for a literature Ireland would honour as Poland honours its literature. Synge, Lady Gregory, A.E. came first; then many novelists and dramatists; Moore and Shaw turned their thoughts to Ireland; nobody could have hoped for so much genius. But most of these writers are better known in other countries, even our novelists who describe in simple, vivid speech the circumstance and history of their country, find most of their readers among the Irish in America, and in England; more perhaps among Englishmen and Americans, without Irish

blood, than in Ireland. Sometimes I receive a little propagandist paper issued by the Polish Government, written in French, and find there pictures of the noble eighteenth century palace where the Polish Academy of Letters meets. Our not less distinguished Academy meets in a room hired for five shillings a night. The explanation is that our upper class cares nothing for Ireland except as a place for sport, that the rest of the population is drowned in religious and political fanaticism. Poland is a Catholic nation and some ten years ago inflicted upon the national enemy an overwhelming, world-famous defeat, but its fanaticism, if it has any, thwarts neither science, nor art, nor letters. Sometimes as the representative of the Abbey Theatre I have called upon some member of Mr. Cosgrave's or Mr. de Valera's government to explain some fanatical attack—we are a State Theatre though our small subsidy has been lately reduced—once as a member of the Irish Academy to complain of the illegal suppression of a book, and upon each occasion I came away with the conviction that the Minister felt exactly as I felt but was helpless: the mob reigned. If that reign is not broken our public life will move from violence to violence, or from violence to apathy, our Parliament disgrace and debauch those that enter it; our men of letters live like outlaws in their own country. It will be broken when some government seeks unity of culture not less than

economic unity, welding to the purpose museum, school, university, learned institution. A nation should be like an audience in some great theatre—‘In the theatre’, said Victor Hugo, ‘the mob becomes a people’—watching the sacred drama of its own history; every spectator finding self and neighbour there, finding all the world there as we find the sun in the bright spot under the burning glass. We know the world through abstractions, statistics, time tables, through images that refuse to compose themselves into a clear design. Such knowledge thins the blood. To know it in the concrete we must know it near at hand; religion itself during our first impressionable years in the dramatis personæ of our own narrow stage; I think of those centuries before the great schism had divided East and West accepted by Catholic and Protestant alike. Into the drama must enter all that have lived with precision and energy; Major Sirr, picture lover, children lover, hateful oppressor, should he strike some creative fancy, not less than Emmet and Fitzgerald; the Ascendency, considering its numbers as fruitful of will and intellect as any stock on earth, not less than those Wild Geese, those Catholic gentlemen who, in the words of Swift, carried into foreign service ‘a valour’ above ‘that of all nations’.

If any Government or party undertake this work it will need force, marching men (the logic of fanaticism, whether in a woman or a mob is drawn from

a premise protected by ignorance and therefore irrefutable); it will promise not this or that measure but a discipline, a way of life; that sacred drama must to all native eyes and ears become the greatest of the parables. There is no such government or party to-day; should either appear I offer it these trivial songs and what remains to me of life.

April, 1934.

P. S. Because a friend belonging to a political party wherewith I had once some loose associations, told me that it had, or was about to have, or might be persuaded to have, some such aim as mine, I wrote these songs. Finding that it neither would nor could, I increased their fantasy, their extravagance, their obscurity, that no party might sing them.

Here is fresh matter, poet,
Matter for old age meet;
Might of the Church and the State,
Their mobs put under their feet.
O but heart's wine shall run pure
Mind's bread grow sweet.

That were a cowardly song,
Wander in dreams no more;
What if the Church and the State
Are the mob that howls at the door!

Wine shall run thick to the end,
Bread taste sour.

August 1934.

SUPERNATURAL SONGS

I RIBH AT THE TOMB OF BAILE AND AILLINN
Because you have found me in the pitch dark night
With open book you ask me what I do:
Mark and digest my tale, carry it afar
To those that never saw this tonsured head
Nor heard this voice that ninety years have cracked
Of Baile and Aillinn you need not speak,
All know their tale, all know what leaf and twig,
What juncture of the apple and the yew,
Surmount their bones; but speak what none have heard.

The miracle that gave them such a death
Transfigured to pure substance what had once
Been bone and sinew; when such bodies join
There is no touching here, nor touching there,
Nor straining joy, but whole is joined to whole;
For the intercourse of angels is a light
Where for its moment both seem lost, consumed.

Here in the pitch dark atmosphere above
The trembling of the apple and the yew,
Here on the anniversary of their death

The anniversary of their first embrace
Those lovers, purified by tragedy,
Hurry into each other's arms; these eyes,
By water, herb and solitary prayer
Made aquiline, are open to that light.
Though somewhat broken by the leaves, that light
Lies in a circle on the grass; therein
I turn the pages of my holy book.

2 RIBH PREFERS AN OLDER THEOLOGY
Abstractions of the Greek Philosophy have crazed
the man,
Recall his Trinity. A father, mother, child (a daughter or a son),
That's how all natural or supernatural stories run.

Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are
wed.
As man, as beast, as an ephemeral fly begets, Godhead
begets Godhead,
For things below are copies the Great Smaragdine
Tablet said.

Yet all must copy copies, all increase their kind;
When the conflagration of their passion sinks, damped
by the body or the mind,
That juggling nature mounts, her coil in their embraces twined.

The mirror scaled serpent is multiplicity,
But all that run in couples, on earth, in flood or air,
share God that is but three,
And could beget or bear themselves could they but
love as He.

3 RIBH CONSIDERS CHRISTIAN LOVE INSUFFICIENT

Why should I seek for love or study it?

It is of God and passes human wit;

I study hatred with great diligence

For that's a passion in my own control,

A sort of besom that can clear the soul

Of everything that is not mind or sense.

Why do I hate man, woman or event?

That is a light my jealous soul has sent.

From terror and deception freed it can

Discover impurities, can show at last

How soul may walk when all such things are past,

How soul could walk before such things began.

Then my delivered soul herself shall learn

A darker knowledge and in hatred turn

From every thought of God mankind has had,

Thought is a garment and the soul's a bride

That cannot in that trash and tinsel hide:

In hating God she may creep close to God.

At stroke of midnight soul cannot endure

A bodily or mental furniture.

What can she take until her Master give!
Where can she look until He make the show!
What can she know until He bid her know!
How can she live till in her blood He live!

4 HE AND SHE

As the moon sidles up
Must she sidle up,
As trips the scared moon
Away must she trip,
'His light had struck me blind
Dared I stop.'

She sings as the moon sings
'I am I, am I;
The greater grows my light
The further that I fly.'
All creation shivers
With that sweet cry.

5 THE FOUR AGES OF MAN

He with body waged a fight,
But body won; it walks upright.

Then he struggled with the heart,
Innocence and peace depart.

Then he struggled with the mind;
His proud heart he left behind.
Now his wars on God begin,
At stroke of midnight God shall win.

6 CONJUNCTIONS

If Jupiter and Saturn meet,
What a crop of mummy wheat!

The sword's a cross; thereon He died:
On breast of Mars the goddess sighed.

7 A NEEDLE'S EYE

All the stream that's roaring by
Came out of a needle's eye;
Things unborn, things that are gone,
From needle's eye still goad it on.

MERU

Civilisation is hooped together, brought
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
By manifold illusion; but man's life is thought
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravening through century after century,
Ravening, raging and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality:
Egypt and Greece good-bye, and good-bye Rome.
Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest
Caverned in night under the drifted snow,
Or where that snow and winter's dreadful blast
Beat down upon their naked bodies, know

That day brings round the night, that before dawn
His glory and his monuments are gone.

COMMENTARY ON SUPERNATURAL SONGS

An Irish poet during a country walk talked of the Church of Ireland, he had preferences for this or that preacher, Archbishop Gregg had pleased him by accepting certain recent Lambeth decrees; one could be a devout communicant and accept all the counsels before the Great Schism that separated Western from Eastern Christianity in the ninth century. In course of time the Church of Ireland would feel itself more in sympathy with early Christian Ireland than could a Church that admitted later developments of doctrine. I said that for the moment I associated early Christian Ireland with India; Shri Purohit Swami, protected during his pilgrimage to a remote Himalayan shrine by a strange great dog that disappeared when danger was past, might have been that blessed Cellach who sang upon his deathbed of bird and beast; Bagwan Shri Hamsa's pilgrimage to Mount Kailás, the legendary Meru, and to lake Manas Sarowa, suggested pilgrimages to Croagh Patrick and to Lough Derg. A famous philosopher believed that every civilisation began, no matter what its geographical origin, with Asia, certain men of science that all of us when still

in the nursery were, if not African, exceedingly Asiatic. Saint Patrick must have found in Ireland, for he was not its first missionary, men whose Christianity had come from Egypt, and retained characteristics of those older faiths that have become so important to our invention. Perhaps some man young enough for so great a task might discover there men and women he could honour—to adapt the words of Goethe—by conferring their names upon his own thoughts; perhaps I myself had made a beginning.

While this book was passing through the press I wrote the poems for that old hermit Ribh. I did not explain the poems in *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, nor will I explain these. I would consider Ribh, were it not for his ideas about the Trinity, an orthodox man.

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